

Two Definitions of Post-Modernism

Post-modernism: A general and wide-ranging term which is applied to literature, art, philosophy, architecture, fiction, and cultural and literary criticism, among others. Postmodernism is largely a reaction to the assumed certainty of scientific, or objective, efforts to explain reality. In essence, it stems from a recognition that reality is not simply mirrored in human understanding of it, but rather, is constructed as the mind tries to understand its own particular and personal reality. For this reason, postmodernism is highly skeptical of explanations which claim to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races, and instead focuses on the relative truths of each person. In the postmodern understanding, interpretation is everything; reality only comes into being through our interpretations of what the world means to us individually. Postmodernism relies on concrete experience over abstract principles, knowing always that the outcome of one's own experience will necessarily be fallible and relative, rather than certain and universal.

Postmodernism is "post" because it denies the existence of any ultimate principles, and it lacks the optimism of there being a scientific, philosophical, or religious truth which will explain everything for everybody - a characteristic of the so-called "modern" mind. The paradox of the postmodern position is that, in placing all principles under the scrutiny of its skepticism, it must realize that even its own principles are not beyond questioning. As the philosopher Richard Tarnas states, postmodernism "cannot on its own principles ultimately justify itself any more than can the various metaphysical overviews against which the postmodern mind has defined itself."

Definition provided by website for PBS program, "Faith and Reason."

<http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/genqloss/postm-body.html>

What the heck is Postmodernism anyway?

The debate on this question is never-ending, and will probably outlast most of its practitioners (of which Barth is one of the last still publishing). The best quick explanation I can think of is that a postmodern author's writings show an awareness of the rules and mechanics of storytelling. One great theme of Postmodernism (and Barth's work in particular) is how stories and the act of storytelling impact our lives. To quote Barth on the subject:

Postmodernism is tying your necktie while simultaneously explaining the step-by-step procedure of necktie-tying and chatting about the history of male neckwear — and managing a perfect full windsor anyhow.

<http://www.davidlouisedelman.com/barth/faqs/>